

Mary Church Terrell

NAACP Founder, Activist, Census Office Clerk

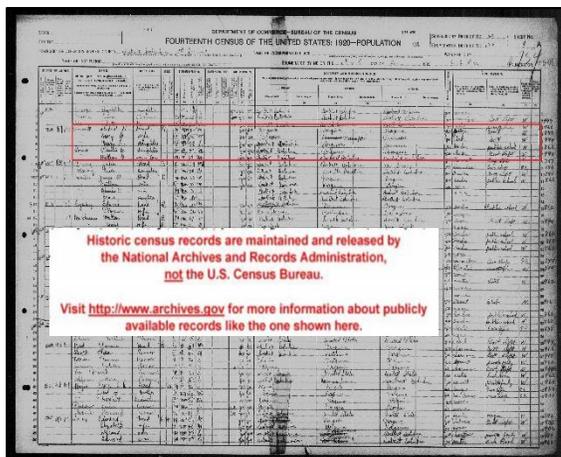
The U.S. Census Bureau is proud of its history of continually evolving to ensure an accurate count of the people of the United States. To accomplish this, the Census Bureau has long embraced the hiring of a diverse workforce representative of local communities and the people who were a part of the neighborhoods that they counted. For this reason, census work was often one of the few government jobs open to minorities. Beginning with the 1870 Census (the first after the abolition of slavery), the Census Bureau began hiring African Americans as enumerators and data processors. With the creation of a permanent Census Bureau in 1902, African American workers and statisticians found an environment with an inclusiveness far greater than many contemporary institutions.

Mary was born on September 23, 1863, in Memphis, Tennessee, to Robert Reed Church, a former slave who became the first African American millionaire in a southern state, and Louisa Ayres, his second wife and a successful entrepreneur in her own right. Realizing the importance of education, her parents sent Mary to a preparatory school in Ohio early in her life. Mary thrived as a young student and eventually earned admittance to Oberlin College. After becoming one of the first African American women to earn a bachelor's degree (1884) and master's degree (1888), she taught at Wilberforce University for 2 years before accepting a position teaching modern languages at the M Street Colored High School in Washington, DC. It was here that Mary worked with and eventually married Robert Herberton Terrell in 1891.



Mary Church Terrell (c. 1910).

Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Ray and Jean Langston in memory of Mary Church and Robert Terrell.



Mary's 1920 Census Record shows she lived with her husband, her biological daughter, her son-in-law, and her adopted daughter.

such as African American empowerment and women's suffrage.

A year after marrying Robert, Mary began her career as an activist by working with Ida B. Wells to organize anti-lynching campaigns and bring attention to the story of her friend, Thomas Moss, who had owned a successful grocery in Memphis and was killed by racist thugs. Additionally, Mary, Ida, and four other prominent African American women founded the Colored Women's League in Washington, DC., which eventually morphed into the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) by 1896. Electing Mary as the organization's first president, the NACW members dedicated their time and resources "to uplifting women, children, families...and the community through service, community education...and the promotion of racial harmony among all people."

Specifically, Mary spoke to diverse audiences on topics

In addition to giving speeches on civil rights and women's suffrage, Mary wrote numerous publications, including "Lynching from a Negro's Point of View" (1904), an essay that attempted to dismantle the false narrative about why African American men were targeted for lynching, and an autobiography, entitled *A Colored Woman in a White World* (1940). Mary also served on

Washington, DC's School Board for 6 years, thus becoming the first African American woman to be appointed to a major city's school board. She also helped found and became a charter member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909.

Mary Church Terrell Retires from Board. Mrs. Mary Church Terrell, the brilliant and energetic member of the Board of Education, retires from the position she has so long adorned.

Mary Church Terrell served on the District of Columbia School Board from 1895–1901 and 1906–1911.

The Advocate (Charleston, West Virginia), June 8, 1911.

During World War I, like many Americans, Mary searched for a way to serve the nation, so she took the civil service exam. A few days after taking the exam, she received a notice to appear at Room 305 of the Aetna Building in Washington, DC. Impressed by her ability to speak French and German, the commanding officer offered her a chance to perform a job where her language ability would be invaluable. However, the military turned down Mary's services after learning she taught at the M Street High School. Undeterred by the rejection, Mary instead accepted a position as a Census Bureau clerk. Although she only worked at the Census Bureau for a short amount of time, Mary made a lasting impact when she desegregated the closest bathroom to her workstation.



Mary Church Terrell participated in numerous sit-ins, pickets, and other forms of peaceful protests as she worked to desegregate restaurants, hotels, theaters, and numerous other public businesses in Washington, DC.

The Pittsburgh Courier (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania), July 31, 1954.

After resigning from the Census Bureau, Mary continued her work as an activist, wife, and mother to Phyllis—the Terrells' only surviving biological child—and Mary, whom the couple adopted a few years after Phyllis's birth. At the end of the First World War, Mary left the federal service and her position with the War Camp Community Service and entered the political realm where she served as the supervisor for the Republican National Committee's (RNC) Committee for Eastern District Work among Colored Women (1920–1929), campaigned on behalf of Ruth Hanna McCormick, a U.S. Senate candidate from Illinois (1929–1931), and worked as an advisor to the RNC during Hoover's 1932 presidential campaign.

Even at the end of her nearly 2-decade career in Republican politics, Mary continued her activist lifestyle. In 1946, she sued the American Association of University Women's (AAUW) Washington, DC chapter for refusing to reinstate her membership, despite having been a member of the organization between 1905–1910. Although the AAUW's national branch sued their DC chapter on Mary's behalf, they lost their case. Undeterred, the AAUW added an anti-discriminatory section to their charter and admitted Mary into their ranks in 1949.

One year after being admitted into the AAUW, Mary and a few of her colleagues began challenging legal segregation in Washington, DC, by entering Thompson's Restaurant—a local chain of restaurants with four

locations—and attempting to receive service. When the store's manager refused to serve her and her colleagues, they walked to the law office next door and began the process of suing Thompson's Restaurant for violating two forgotten Reconstruction-area laws that required restaurants, hotels, and other public businesses to serve "any respectable, well-behaved person without regard to race." As Mary and her colleagues' legal suit worked its way through the legal system, she also worked to desegregate other DC restaurants by organizing and participating in sit-ins, boycotts, and other forms of peaceful protests. Finally, on June 8, 1953, the U.S. Supreme Court, via *District of Columbia v. Thompson Co.*, ruled in favor of Mary and the District lawyers and declared segregation in Washington, DC, unconstitutional. This is one of the first successful lawsuits which challenged segregation.

Mary Church Terrell passed away on July 24, 1954, at her home in High Beach, Maryland, at the age of 91, outliving her husband by almost 29 years. However, Mary lived long enough to witness the U.S. Supreme Court issue its historic ruling in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, which ended segregationist policies in the nations' schools. We are grateful for Mary's service to the U.S. Census Bureau, her community, and our nation.